

## **PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE**

The language we use can have far-reaching and unintended effects. While our culture has generally moved beyond the use of stigmatizing and dehumanizing terms to refer to individuals of different genders, races, religions and nationalities, similar progress is often lacking with respect to individuals diagnosed with mental illness. Terms such as “emotionally disturbed,” “schizophrenic” and “insane” reduce individuals to their conditions, rather than acknowledging their individualism and humanity.

People-First language is a concept that has gained widespread support among consumers of mental health services, advocates and family members, as well as a number of state and federal government agencies, most notably the Center for Mental Health Services. As its name implies, People-First language puts the individual before their condition, recognizing that an individual’s mental illness is but *one* characteristic of their *whole* person. By using terms such as “people with mental illness” instead of “the mentally ill” or “person (diagnosed) with schizophrenia” instead of “schizophrenic” we acknowledge that a person is more than their diagnosis.

People-First language may also be employed when referring to individuals in contact with the criminal justice system. Replacing the labels “criminal” and “ex-convict” with “criminal justice-involved” or “formerly incarcerated” ensures that we do not define an individual solely by their past missteps.

It bears mentioning that the promotion of People-First language is not simply a nod to political correctness or hypersensitivity. The use of labels perpetuates stigma against people with mental illness, and that stigma can have far-reaching effects for both the individual and society. For people with mental illness, stigma contributes to low self-esteem, isolation, and reluctance to seeking help. For society, it perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation about mental illness and can be used to justify prejudice and discrimination (“I would never hire an ex-con—they can’t be trusted.” “Did you hear Judy’s daughter is a schizo? I’ll never go over there again; she could snap at any time!”). While altering our use of language will not end all discrimination, it is an important step in the right direction.

For more information on the use of People-First Language, visit:

- <http://www.apastyle.org/disabilities.html>